

## **DON BOSCO FOR POOR AND ABANDONED YOUNG PEOPLE IN TWO PREVIOUSLY UNEDITED DOCUMENTS OF 1854 & 1862**

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### PREFACE<sup>10</sup>

There are three texts: 1] An *Introduction* to the draft plan for the festive oratory; 2] An Historical *Outline* on the development of the work of the Oratories at Turin from 1841 to 1854; 3] other Historical *Outlines* on the development of the work of the oratories at Turin from 1841 to 1862.

In the primitive redactions of the rule of the oratory, the 'Introduction' and the 'Outline' constitute a sort of preliminary explanatory and historical section. This appears from the successive manuscript copies distributed among those responsible for the oratories and in those copies prepared for publication and in the definitive and official edition [of the Regulations] in 1877.

The 'Introduction' was published, incomplete [lines 1-25; 47-51 ], by Fr Lemoyne in Vol. II of the *Memorie Biografiche*, and assigned the date November 3rd, 1841, when Don Bosco, ordained only a few months, settles in Turin ... It appeared, probably for the first time, wholly transcribed from Don Bosco's manuscript version in the collection 'S. Giovanni Bosco, *Scritti sul sistema preventivo nell'educazione della gioventu* ', edited by P. Braido [Brescia, La Scuola, 1965].

The 'Historical Outline', the oldest and most interesting testimony written by Don Bosco at the very beginning of his work has never before been published. The best writers on Don Bosco, however, know of it and refer to it.

The 'Historical Outlines', according to Lemoyne, were supposed to have been published, and as such are listed, by P. Stella ["Gli Scritti a Stampa di S. Giovanni Bosco, Rome 1977]. A passage, corresponding to lines 186-202 of the present edition is reproduced in MB VI 8045. Subsequent corrections and refinements make one regard it as a document being gradually prepared for publication. But of such there is no trace, not even in the archives and libraries of those for whom it would have most obviously been intended [for example, the bishops from whom Don Bosco requested letters of commendation in order to obtain approval for his nascent religious society.

Outline of Regulations  
for the Boys' Oratory of St Francis of Sales in Turin,  
in the Valdocco district.

<sup>9</sup> The translation is based on Braido's critical edition published in 1988 in "Don Bosco per i Giovani..." LAS. Piccola Biblioteca dell' Istituto Storico Salesiano,

<sup>10</sup> By the editor.

## Introduction

Ut filios Dei, qui erant dispersi, congregaret in unum. Jn Ch 11, v. 52. <sup>11</sup>

It seems to me that the words of the Holy Gospel which speak to us of the divine Saviour come down from heaven to earth to gather together all the children of God scattered all over the world, could be applied literally to the young people of our times. They constitute the most vulnerable yet valuable section of human society. We base our hopes for the future on them and they are not of their nature depraved. Were it not for careless parents, idleness, mixing in bad company, something they experience especially on Sundays, it would be so easy to inculcate in their young hearts the principles of order, of good behaviour, of respect, of religion, because if they are ruined at that age, it is due more to carelessness than to ingrained malice.

These young people truly have need of some kind person who will take care of them, work with them guide them in virtue, keep them away from vice.

The problem lies in finding ways of gathering them, of being able to speak to them, of making them good.

The Son of God was sent for this; only his holy religion can achieve it. But this religion which of itself is eternal and unchangeable, which has been and in every age always will be the teacher of the people, contains a law so perfect that it can change according to the events of the time, adapt itself to the character of all peoples. Among the appropriate means for spreading the spirit of religion among hearts that are uncultivated and abandoned, one may find that of the Oratories. These Oratories are a sort of gathering in which the young people are involved in pleasing and harmless recreation, after they have attended the church services.

The support which the civic and church authorities have given me, the zeal shown by many worthy people who have come to my aid both in kind and by working directly, are a clear sign of the blessings of the Lord, and of the gratitude of the public.

It is now time to set out a regulatory scheme that might serve as a guideline for the administration of this aspect of the sacred ministry, as well as an indication to the priests and lay people who in goodly numbers work so hard in it with such loving care.

I have often begun, and I have always given up on account of the innumerable difficulties I had to overcome. Now, and to ensure the preservation of the unity of spirit and uniformity of discipline, as well as to satisfy not a few persons in authority who have counselled me to do so, I have decided to complete this work, no matter what it Costs.<sup>12</sup>

I begin by saying that above all I have no intention of dictating either law or precept; my aim is to set out what we do in the Boys' Oratory of St Francis of Sales at Valdocco, and the way that we do it.

It could be that someone will find expressions that seem to show that I am seeking honour and glory: let them not believe it. Such an impression may be attributed to the anxiety I have to write about things as they have actually happened and as they are to the present day.

<sup>11</sup> " .. to gather into one all the dispersed children of God."

<sup>12</sup> 'work' = of drawing up a Regulation.

When I gave myself to this aspect of the sacred ministry, I saw myself as consecrating every effort of mine to the greater glory of God, and to the good of souls; I saw myself as working to make good citizens for this earth, so that they might be one day worthy inhabitants of heaven. May God help me to be able to continue in this way to the last breath of my life. So be it.

#### Historical Outline on the Oratory of St Francis of Sales

This Oratory, or gathering of young people on [Sundays and] feast days, began in the Church of St Francis of Assisi.<sup>13</sup> For many years during the summertime, the Rev. Fr Caffasso used to teach catechism every Sunday to bricklayers' lads in a little room attached to the sacristy of the aforementioned Church.<sup>14</sup> The heavy burden of work on this priest caused him to interrupt this work which he enjoyed so much. I took it up towards the end of 1841, and I began by gathering in that same place two young adults, who were seriously in need of religious instruction.<sup>15</sup> These were joined by others and during 1842 the number went up to twenty, and sometimes twenty-five. From these beginnings I learnt two important truths: that in general young people are not bad in themselves, but more often they become such through contact with evil persons; and [even] these same evil ones separated one from the other are susceptible to great moral change.

In 1843 the catechism classes continued on the same footing and the number increased to fifty, a number the place assigned to me could scarcely contain. During the same period, by attending the prisons of Turin I was able to verify that the poor unfortunates sent to that place of punishment are generally poor young men who come into the city from far away either because they need to find work, or encouraged by some scapegrace. Particularly on feast days these people, left to themselves spend on games [of chance] or on sweetmeats the little money they earn during the week.<sup>16</sup> This is the beginning of many vices, and those young people who were good become too soon at risk themselves, and dangerous for others. Nor can the prisons better them in any way, because while they stay there they learn more refined ways of doing evil, so that when they get out, they become worse.

I turned therefore to this class of young person as the most abandoned and in danger, and in the course of each week either with promises or little gifts, I managed to gain pupils.<sup>17</sup> As their number had grown a lot, and having been, in the summer of 1844, given a more spacious locale, I found myself at times with some eighty youths around me. My soul rejoiced at seeing myself surrounded by pupils, just the ones I was seeking, all with a job, whose conduct, whether on weekdays or weekends, I could in some way stand surety for. I kept an eye on them, and I saw one return to the parents from whom he had fled, another put to a master, all of them on the way to being taught their religion.

But the community regimen, characteristic of the clergy hostel of St Francis of Assisi, the silence and good order required by the public functions of that church, having as it did such a large congregation, got in the way of my plans. And even though the late lamented Canon Guala encouraged me to persevere, nevertheless I became aware that another locale was absolutely

13 Added to clarify the sense in a non-Italian context, where 'giorni festivi' would especially mean 'Sundays'. Hereafter, 'feast days'.

14 As he often did, Don Bosco misspells the name of his mentor, St Joseph Cafasso.

15 And Bartholomew Garelli? Cfr MO 124-127.

16 I have deliberately used a 19th century term, 'sweetmeats' to ~late the equality archaic, if colourful, Italian term 'ghiottonerie'.

17 sic: 'allievi'.

necessary.<sup>18</sup> Given that religious instruction occupies the young people for only a certain period of time, afterwards it is necessary to afford them some outlet, either going for walks, or playing games.

Providence arranged that at the end of October 1844 I should go to the Refuge as Spiritual Director.<sup>19</sup> I invited my sons to come and visit me in my new residence, and the next Sunday they were there in a much bigger number than usual.<sup>20</sup> So my room became Oratory and playground. What a sight! There was not a chair, a table or anything else that wasn't attacked by this friendly invasion.

Meanwhile, together with the Rev. Canon Borelli, who from that time was the Oratory's strongest supporter, we had chosen a room intended as dining room and common room for the priests working at the Refuge, which seemed big enough for our purposes and adapted it as a chapel.<sup>21</sup> The Archbishop gave permission, and on the day of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady (December 8, 1844), the chapel we had long hoped-for was blessed, with the faculty of celebrating the holy sacrifice of the Mass, and of giving benediction with the Blessed Sacrament.

The news of a chapel destined exclusively for the young, the Liturgy prepared especially for them, a bit of open space to romp around in, proved to be powerful attractions, and our church, which at that time began to be called Oratory, became overcrowded.<sup>22</sup> We made do as best we could. Rooms, the kitchen, corridors: in every corner there were catechism classes. It was all Oratory.

Things went ahead this way when an incident, or better Divine Providence with hidden purpose, set our Oratory topsy turvey. On August 10th 1845 the Little Hospital of St Philomena was<sup>23</sup> opened and the locale we had been using for nine months had to be given over to other uses. It was necessary to find another place. As the result of a formal request the city Mayor gave us permission to go to the church of St Martin near the "Molazzi", the Mills of the city. So that Sunday our change of residence was announced. Those youngsters, on the one hand upset because they had to leave a place they had come to love as their own, on the other excited by the novelty, all prepared themselves for the departure. You would have seen one carry a chair, another a bench; this one a picture or a statue, that one vestments, or breadbaskets, or cruets.<sup>24</sup> Others, much more carefree, carried stilts, bags of bocce balls or ninepins; but all of them anxious to see the new oratory.

We happily passed two months there, even though we could not do everything we wanted, insofar as we could not celebrate Mass, hold Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament, or recreate with freedom. That calm was the forerunner of a storm that was to put the Oratory to a severe test. Word got around that such gatherings of youngsters were dangerous, and that in a moment it could change from a recreation to an uprising. Some uprising poor ignorant young fellows could carry out, without weapons and without money, who gathered together only to learn their catechism, and who would have trembled had a crow flown overhead. Notwithstanding this, the

18 There is no English equivalent for the title 'Teologo' - Theologian given to the Cathedral canon whose task it was to interpret Scripture. Guala [1774-1848] was the founder of the Convitto, which had such an influence on Don Bosco's theological development. I have adopted the term 'Canon'.

19 The Pious Work of 'The Refuge' was founded by the Marchioness Barolo for 'fallen women'.

20 Did the type of inmate influence this? Marchioness Barolo thought so!

21 Don Bosco often uses the Italian form 'Borelli' for Fr John Borel [1801-1873], one of his best and most faithful collaborators.

22 'romp around'; "saltellare", lit. hop about.

23 The 'Ospidaletto', of 56 beds for girls from 4 to 14 suffering from rickets, occupied part of the Refuge.

24 'Breadbaskets': 'panieri'. It seems obvious from the context that Don Bosco meant ciboriums, 'pissidi', but a paniera is a breadbasket..

rumours go on spreading, and a report is made to the mayor, in which I was nominated as the head brigand; that at the Mills an unbearable racket was being made, an intolerable disturbance, with great damage to the walls, to the [church] benches, and even to the paving of the courtyard. I was hard put to it to show that these assertions were unfounded: all in vain. An order is issued commanding us to vacate forthwith the locale they had made available to us.<sup>25</sup>

I asked then to be allowed to go to the cemetery church of the Holy Cross, called St Peter in Chains.<sup>26</sup> The request was granted. We went there with great joy, but it was for one Sunday only. Due to the fact that new reports were made in writing to the Mayor, in which our meetings were described as acts of insubordination, we were forthwith forbidden to set foot there again.

I will not mention the names of the individuals who made these harsh reports in the City. I simply observe [God forbid I should rejoice in it ] one of them lived but one day more, the other three until the day the report was made, something that made a profound impression on the souls of the young men, who had come to know about these things. What to do? I had a heap of equipment for church and for recreation. A crowd of boys who followed me everywhere, and not an inch of ground to call my own.

Afraid that my sons would cease to attend, I kept my worries to myself and each Sunday would take them, sometimes to Sassi, sometimes to Our Lady of the Fields, sometimes to the Capuchins-On-The-Hill.<sup>27</sup> Far from decreasing the numbers, this increased them. In the meantime, as the winter was drawing near, and the weather no longer favourable for excursions into the countryside, in accord with Canon Borelli we rented three rooms in the Moretta House, a building not far distant from the actual Oratory of Valdocco. During that winter our activities were limited to simple catechism lessons each Sunday afternoon.<sup>28</sup>

At this time there was other gossip that had already been spread around, *that the oratories were a deliberate way of getting young people away from their particular parishes, to instruct them in suspect principles.*<sup>29</sup> This accusation grew from the fact that I allowed my young people every kind of recreation, as long as they did not sin, or do anything against good conduct. With regard to the former I sought to excuse myself, saying that my purpose was to gather together only those young people who did not belong to any parish, and of whom most, being outsiders, did not even know to which parish they belonged.<sup>30</sup> The more I tried to explain the truth of the matter, the more it was interpreted badly.

Furthermore, certain events came together to make us leave the Moretta house, in so far as in March 1846 I had to rent a bit of meadow from the Fillippi brothers, precisely where there is a pig iron foundry today.<sup>31</sup> And there I was, under the clear blue sky, in the middle of a field, with a big hedge about me which kept out only those who did not want to come in, surrounded by about

25 The text editor P. Braido remarks at this point that Don Bosco's account is a little exaggerated; the problem was simply that the neighbours could not stand the row. But even he fails to mention that one of the bones of contention was the fouling by the boys of the nearby canals which powered the mills...

26 popularly and picturesquely known as "St Peter of the Cabbages". Documentary evidence shows that this was the first port of call, the Molassi' the second. Strange then the insistence of early Salesians like Cagliero, Rua, Berto, to the contrary: unwillingness to contradict the Father?

27 Sassi was a village about 3 km from Turin, whose chief 'industry' was clothes washing; 'Our Lady of the Countryside' [lit.] was at about the same distance in another direction; the 'Mount of the Capuchins', a church and monastery on a hill overlooking Turin.

28 No mention of the evening classes which Don Bosco states in MO 11511 began at this time.

29 The emphasis is Don Bosco's.

30 'Forestieri', at the time of DB meant anyone who did not come from Turin. that is, an 'outsider'.

31 Moretta in fact did not renew the contract.

three hundred young people who saw in that Oratory heaven on earth, which appeared to be, and was, heaven itself.

In the meanwhile, the Vicar of the City, the Marquis Cavour, who had already been informed of one of these weekend gatherings, sent for me, and having summarised for me all that had been communicated to him about the oratory, said to me, "My dear Reverend sir, let me give you a piece of good advice. Let those villains go their way; these gatherings are dangerous".<sup>32</sup> I replied, "All I am trying to do is better the lot of these poor children, and if the Municipality would care to assign a locale to me, I have every hope of being able to lessen the number of the troublesome ones, and at the same time, the numbers of those who go to prison. "

"You deceive yourself, dear Father, you labour in vain. From where will you get the means? I cannot permit these meetings."

"I am convinced by the results that my labour is not in vain. The means are in the hands of the Lord, who often uses the basest means to carry out his work..."

"But I cannot permit these meetings .

"Do not permit them on my account, Marquis; permit them for the good of these children who would be ruined if left to their own devices."

"I am not here to argue: this is a disorder, and I mean to stop it; do you not know that every assembly without legitimate permission is unlawful?"

"My gatherings have no political purpose - only to teach the catechism to these poor lads. And I do this with the Archbishop's permission."

"The Archbishop knows about these things?"

"He knows of them, and I have never moved a finger without his counsel and consent."

"But I cannot permit that you hold these assemblies".

"Marquis, I cannot believe you want to forbid me from teaching catechism, something my Archbishop has permitted?"

"Very well, I shall speak with the Archbishop, but then you will no longer refuse the orders which will be given you. Or you shall force me to take measures I do not wish. "

The Archbishop was informed of everything, and he encouraged me to be patient and courageous. In the meantime in order to be able to attend more directly to the care of my children, I resigned perforce from the Refuge, as a result of which I was without employment, without means of support; every project of mine taken the wrong way, mentally and physically exhausted, so much so that the word was put around that I was mad.<sup>33</sup>

Failing to make others understand my plans, I sought to mark time, because I was deeply convinced that the facts would justify what I was doing. Furthermore, I wanted so much to have a

32 This is Michele Benso di Cavour. brother of Camillo Benso. the first Prime Minister of Italy. 33Cf BM 323 ff.

suitable site, that in my mind I considered this to be already achieved, and it was for these reasons that these same dear friends of mine judged me to be out of my senses; and my helpers, given I would not go along with them and give up my plans, abandoned me completely.

Canon Borelli agreed with my ideas and not being able to act otherwise, thought well to choose a dozen lads, and teach them their catechism privately, in expectation of better times for achieving our ideals.

I replied, "This is not the way. The Lord has begun the work, He must bring it to term".

"But meanwhile, where will we gather our boys?"

"At the Oratory".

"Where is this Oratory?"

"I see it there, already existing: I see a church, I see a house, I see a playground: it is there, and I see it."

"Where are these things?"

"I do not know where they are, but I see them."

I said this because of a lively wish to have these things, and I was thoroughly convinced that God would have given them to us.

Canon Borelli felt sorry for me, the way I was, and he too went about saying he greatly feared I was out of my mind. Fr Cafasso told me to take no decision at that time. The Archbishop was of the opinion I should continue.

In the meanwhile the Marquis Cavour, determined to stop these gatherings, which he regarded as dangerous, and not wishing to decide anything which might displease the Archbishop, called a meeting of the *Ragioneria* which was the same as the Municipal Council, in the Palace of the Archbishop.<sup>34</sup> The Archbishop told me later how it seemed to him like the Last Judgement.<sup>35</sup> After a brief discussion it was decided that these gatherings be absolutely forbidden.

One member of the *Ragioneria* was Count Provana di Collegno, then Comptroller General. He had always encouraged me, and he had helped me out of his own estate, as well as on behalf of His Majesty (King] Charles Albert. This prince, God rest him, used to love hear tell of this oratory; he helped me in cases of particular need; and he made known to me several times by means of the above-mentioned Count of Collegno, how much he admired this aspect of the sacred ministry, and that he regarded it after the manner of the foreign missions; and that it was his wish that similar gatherings of poor young people who might be in danger should be held in every city of his domains.

When he came to know of my critical state he sent me three hundred francs by the hand of the above-mentioned count with words of encouragement, requesting him to communicate to the

34 It was not the same. Don Bosco meant either the executive of the Council, or the Finance Committee: more likely the former.

35 A remark which indicates how close Don Bosco was with Mgr Fransoni.

*Ragioneria* that he wished such gatherings might continue, and that in case of danger of disorder, measures should be taken to anticipate and prevent them. At the receipt of this message the Vicar remained silent, and said that he would take measures such that disorders would not occur. The arrangement was that, every Sunday, a certain number of municipal officers, a kind of officials, would be dispatched to assist at our meetings in order to report in due course to the one in charge.<sup>36</sup>

The officials were present at the catechism lessons, at the sermon, at the recreation, and reported all things in detail to the Vicar, such that in a few months he had a better opinion of the Oratory, and things began to take on a better aspect.

*The Beginning of the Actual Oratory of Valdocco  
and its growth up to the present time.*

It was a Sunday evening, the fifteenth of March, a memorable day for our Oratory. Looking at this large number of youngsters playing, and I alone in their midst, totally spent in energy and health, not knowing where to turn, because the field I had rented was to be used for another purpose, I became so upset I began to weep. "My God", I kept saying, raising my eyes to heaven. "Why do you not show me the place where you want me to gather together these dear children? Show it to me, or tell me what I must do".

I was turning over such expressions in my mind when along comes one Pancrazio Soave telling me of a certain Pinardi who had a place he could rent to me, very suitable for my needs.<sup>37</sup> I went at once: it was a shed. To discuss, to agree on the price; how to turn the place into a chapel: it was done in a couple of minutes. I rushed pellmell back to my children, I gathered them together, and carried away with joy, I began to shout, "Courage, my sons, we have an Oratory. We will have a church a sacristy, a schoolhouse, a playground".

This news was received with enthusiasm.<sup>38</sup> And on Easter Sunday, the [12th] day of April, we carried to the place all the equipment for church and recreation, and the new chapel was inaugurated. Soon after, other rooms of that same Pinardi house were rented in which the Sunday and evening schools were begun. Cavalier Gonella distinguished benefactor of this Oratory, was so pleased with these schools that he arranged for them to be 'started at the [church Of] St Pelagia. The municipality itself was impressed with the evening schools and they were opened in various quarters of the City where today any worker who so wishes is offered the opportunity to be instructed. The events which followed this period being known to all, I will limit myself simply to noting them.

In the year 1846, on a day in April, the actual church was blessed with the faculty of celebrating

36The Word 'arciere' here translated 'municipal office?' means literally an 'archer'. It is a piedmontesism for 'sbirro'. spy, secret agent. 'Apparitori' ['official'(s)] simply does not feature in current dictionaries; the Russian 'apparatchik' is clearly related. The editor remarks that we are dealing here either simply with police 'guardie civiche', or the 'Feared Public Security Guards'.

37The rental agreement was made on April 1, 1846. In 1849 when the agreement with Soave expired, Pinardi rented the whole house to Don Bosco, selling it to him on 19/21/1851 for 28,500 lire. This site still stands today at the heart of the huge Valdocco complex which is the Salesian Mother House.

38"...una specie di entusiasmo", lit., "a kind of enthusiasm", a strange phrase under the circumstances.